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ABSTRACT

Ethical issues make writing assignments more than academic exercises, especially when the ethical issues involve the writing itself. Such issues arise in every aim and mode of discourse and in every stage of the writing process, from choosing a topic to editing the final draft. Informative discourse must be factual and comprehensive, and have surprise value; readers have the right to know the facts and to be given a full treatment of the subject without sensationalism. The three ethical issues of scientific discourse are definitions, evidence, and rules of interpretation. Each segment of the scientific community has conventions that are understood and followed, and violations are considered unethical. Exploratory discourse involves raising a question, searching for a new answer, and testing the new answer. In this instance, the ethical issue is the need to understand the original paradigm before searching for a new one. Most writing demands constant ethical decisions and students must be taught this to appreciate this aspect of writing. (SRT)

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LEADING STUDENTS TO RECOGNIZE WRITING AS AN ETHICAL ACT

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LEADING STUDENTS TO RECOGNIZE WRITING AS AN ETHICAL ACT

Some professors and administrators insist on viewing writing courses as mere skills courses, in which we are mainly supposed to try to teach students how to spell the words and where to place the commas. However, most writing teachers would rather see the courses as humanities courses, in which students grapple with important issues facing mankind--using writing to think about the issues, to shape their thoughts on the issues, and to communicate these thoughts to others. We prefer this approach not only because we have been largely unsuccessful at teaching spelling and punctuation but mainly because practicing writing without also practicing the creation of content cannot be done.

And what we teach students about writing is not only how to do it but how to use it to accomplish goals. For writing that does not aim to accomplish goals is, like that without serious attention to content, hardly worth doing. However, what we often overlook, in the rush to get something on paper worth saying, is that to work towards goals is inevitably to become involved in ethical issues. Indeed, it is the ethical issues that can make our writing assignments something more than academic exercises to be performed. Although many students claim that it is useless to become involved in ethical issues, we have to show these students that they are incorrect. Also most students quickly find that grappling with ethical issues is interesting. For example, I have used Professor Ruggiero's [Vincent Ryan Ruggiero, one of the other panelists] book on ethics and similar materials many times in my classes, and students are never so

enthusiastic than when debating the ethical issues raised in such materials.

Some of the same enthusiasm comes about not only when we consciously introduce subjects involving ethical questions but also when ethical issues involved in the writing itself are brought up in class. Such issues arise in every aim and mode of discourse and in every stage of the writing process from choosing a topic to editing the final draft. My main purpose today is to discuss such issues. However, since this is much too big a topic for the time available, and since one can't raise all of the possible issues in a class anyway, I intend to concentrate on just the aims of discourse and the issues raised by principles governing the types of material that each aim must cover. Furthermore, since this is a panel related to technical writing, I'm going to concentrate on the expository, or referential aims, although I'll begin with a few words about the nonexpository aims as illustrations.

One nonexpository aim is, of course, literature, and I'm sure everyone is aware of the many ethical issues that arise when writing literature. For example, one of the principles of story writing is that you must have people in your stories. Most of us think that it's not ethical for writers to use stereotypes instead of individuals for characters, especially when those stereotypes are insulting ones such as the rich Jew, the drunken Irishman, the flighty blonde, and so on.

Another nonexpository aim is persuasion, and here the ethical issues have been debated since classical times. Is it ethical for the rhetor to simplify issues in order to appeal to the uneducated mind? Is it right to base one's appeal on the prejudices of the audience? Is it moral to overwhelm the audience with eloquence at the expense of logic? These are

still vital issues that every writer must decide, and so must our students as they try to write their persuasive essays. We owe it to them to bring out such issues in our classes.

Finally, consider the problem of writing expressive discourse. We say that expressive writing is intended to help students come to know themselves, and this will never happen unless students are honest with themselves. But how many autobiographies have we read that turned out to be self-serving apologies and not honest self-exploration? It's unethical, I would say, to pretend that you're doing self-expression and then do persuasion instead. The other side of the coin, of course, is the student who "spills his guts" and tells you things you would rather not know. It's also unethical, we might say, to burden other people with your personal problems, especially when, as with some students, it is done mainly for shock effect.

With those illustrations of ethical issues in the nonexpository aims, let us turn to the expository aims. I'm going to use the Kinneavy version of expository, which divides the referential aims into information, science, and exploration (James L. Kinneavy, The Aims of Discourse, 1971). Secondly, I'm going to ignore ethical issues that arise from organization and style and limit my discussion to the three issues, or logical strategies, as identified in the textbook I am associated with, Writing in the Liberal Arts Tradition (Kinneavy, McCleary and Nakadate, Harper & Row, 1985). Since these issues or logical strategies are the keys to the general nature of the content, they should expose the main ethical issues. Finally, although these issues are also related to the gathering of content, I'm going to ignore issues related to gathering and concentrate just on the writing, although it is very hard to separate the two concerns.

Let us start, then, with informative discourse, and let us suppose,

just to make the discussion more concrete, that we have asked the students to write an informative description of a process. Now, information has the three logical strategies referred to as factuality, comprehensiveness, and surprise value. All three of these issues are as much ethical as they are practical, and they come up in all informative writing, including our description of a process.

I define the rule of factuality as the rule that all of the material in an informative piece should be facts, and I judge factuality from the standpoint of the writer. That is, readers assume that, with some exceptions, each statement in an informative piece such as a news story is about something that the author knows to be a fact because he or she witnessed it first hand. Since authors often know only what they have been told or what they have read, this rule accounts for the need for documentation such as "according to so-and-so," or "Mr. whosit said." If documentation is not included, we assume that the author was personally present or that the statement reflects accepted knowledge. In the case of the description of a process, we assume, if there is no documentation, that the writers have witnessed the process themselves. But if the process being described is a theoretical one, such as a psychological or sociological process, we are going to be very unhappy with our students if they don't tell us whose theory the process description is based on.

Everyone recognizes this rule, I think, as related to plagiarism, the failure to document one's information. However, we usually present plagiarism to students as the act of stealing from someone and making a false claim of authorship, but these issues are difficult for students to relate to. In fact, we usually must back off plagiarism as an ethical issue because we can't prove an intent to steal, which is just as well

because most acts of plagiarism that I have seen were errors made by people who do not understand the concept; they are not unethical acts. It is far easier, in my view, to make plagiarism an ethical issue on grounds of factuality than of stealing. If there is an undocumented sentence in a student's paper, it's easier to question whether the student knows that fact personally than to accuse the student of stealing it. In sum, it's easier to present the ethical issue as one of a false claim of knowledge than one of theft.

A second rule of informative discourse is comprehensiveness, which is the requirement that a topic be covered completely. This, too, is partly a practical and partly an ethical issue. The practical side is that it is often necessary to cover one aspect of a topic in order for the reader to understand another side of it. The ethical side, again, has to do with false impressions. A reader who is trying to learn information on a topic has a right to expect complete coverage of all the facts implied by the title and introduction of the article. Sometimes when certain facts are not mentioned, the writer has simply made a mistake, but readers have a right to worry whether article has been deliberately slanted for nefarious purposes. For example, one type of process description is the recipe, and we become most unhappy with cooks who try to protect their secrets by giving us a recipe without that secret ingredient that makes it special. It's one thing when a writer tells us that facts on a certain aspect of the topic are not known, but it's a violation of ethics if we are not even told that the aspect exists.

Finally comes the rule of surprise value, which is the requirement that writers tell readers something that they (the readers) don't already know. It's not unethical to repeat the known, but it is impractical because old news won't be read. Also issues of practicality are that the

rule of surprise value permits compromises in comprehensiveness so that writers can omit known aspects of a topic and in factuality so that widely known facts need not be documented. Ethics arises when one must decide which aspects of the subject to emphasize. The temptation will be to emphasize the flashy aspects instead of the significant aspects or to play into one's biases. Either way, the result is sensationalism, and that is certainly a violation of ethics. To return to our example of the process description again, suppose one is describing a certain technique of love making. It is often the case that what comes before the central part is more important to the successful performance of the total technique than later parts. It would be unethical of a writer, in my view, to concentrate on the later parts, because they are more sensational, and mislead readers about what must really be done. However, such misleading emphases occur all the time.

In sum, the writing of informative discourse is loaded with ethical issues that must be raised with students. They turn what could be a dry topic into one fraught with social significance. Most, of course, are already well known to educated people because they arise in connection with journalism, but students need to be shown that all types of informative discourse face such issues.

Less well known are the issues that arise in connection with the writing of scientific discourse. We are all aware of ethical problem with <u>doing</u> science, which have to do with such matters as basic honesty in conducting experiments, using human subjects without their informed consent, or inflicting suffering on animals. But what about the writing of scientific discourse? About the most we hear of it are issues having to do with style; that is, some people seem morally offended by the use of first

person pronouns or field-related jargon. I'd suggest that there are much more important issues than that.

The three issues or logical strategies of scientific discourse, comparable to the factuality, comprehensiveness and surprise value of informative discourse, are what I call definitions, evidence, and rules of interpretation. Again, these strategies govern what must be covered in scientific discourse. However, since all three differ depending on the field in which the science is being done, let me limit myself to those scientific discourses employing statistics as their method of drawing conclusions. For purposes of illustration, let us suppose that students have been assigned to survey the student body on some issue of importance and write a paper in the form of a standard research note that might be published in an academic journal.

The first issue, then, is definitions. This is the requirement that the writer must report how various aspects of the statistical study were defined. We permit considerable latitude for definitions, as long as the writer lets us know what was done. For example, we ask the writer to define the population under study, and we allow some latitude here. It may not be possible to study the population that the writer is really interested in, and thus a subset of the population may be studied instead. That's all right, but ethics enters the picture when the writer draws a sample from a subset of the population and then tries to generalize beyond that subset. For example, a student may have set out to poll the student body on issues related to Nicaragua but, due to various reasons, may have just polled the members of his fraternity. It would be unethical for the student to then claim that the results are representative of the whole student body, unless the writer couches the generalization in all sorts of qualifications. Since a researcher must make all kinds of such definitions

in order to carry out research, there are plenty of places for the researcher to become unethical when writing up the study.

Similar things affect rules of interpretation--that is, those rules that allow us to make sense of data or specify how something must be done if valid conclusions are to be drawn. Doing science is loaded with rules. Given a particular field, there are rules for how a sample must be picked, rules for how the experiment must be set up, and rules for how to measure the results. These rules must be part of the written record, especially if the writer deviates from them. Researchers have learned, and so must students, that they deviate from the rules at the possible peril of not being published, and that it becomes very tempting to to gloss over any violations of them. Take, for example, the rules that data must be continuous and that samples must be picked randomly in order for the use of most of the common statistical procedures to be justifiable. These are not absolute rules, and a researcher can take certain steps to get around them as long as it's made clear what was done. But it is sorely tempting to save oneself a lot of trouble by taking shortcuts and relying on the probability that no one, especially an English teacher, will notice. Equally important are the rules by which one interprets the data that result from the research. Most of these rules, in the case of a statistical study, are statistical formulas, and the ethical problem is that there are always several possible formulas that can be used. For example, there are several different t-tests and several ways to figure reliability, and the choice of which to use can involve ethics. For example, is it ethical to try a conservative t-test and then switch to a liberal one if things don't work out as you hoped? Especially, is it ethical to make such a switch without saying so in writing?

Of course, in much composition research I have seen, the ethical problem is even more basic than this--the problem of so-called researchers who cannot make intelligent choices among rules because they don't know beans about statistics. They therefore hire or beg someone to do the statistics for them--without reporting that fact--someone who may know less about what is appropriate in composition research than the composition researcher knows about statistics. But enough of my pet peeves.

Finally, then, we come to the last rule of scientific discourse, the rule of evidence. In the case of statistical research, the evidence consists of numbers, each number supposedly reflecting one parameter of one member of the sample that was studied. The rule of evidence presents a host of ethical problems for the writer, often not the writer's own fault. The journal almost never permits the writer to present raw data, so we readers must have faith that the researcher collected each number carefully, and also carefully reduced the collection of numbers into a form, such as an average, that the journal would allow space for. In addition, we expect the writer to reveal exactly what the numbers stand for and what their limitations are. Any measurement is subject to error, especially in a survey such as we hypothetically assigned our students to do. One can never be certain that the questions were correctly understood by the respondents, that the respondent answered honestly, or that the survey was properly written in the first place. We must teach students that it's unethical to put too much faith in the numbers that result from such procedures and to fail to couch one's conclusions in many qualifications.

Finally, we come to the last kind of referential writing, exploratory discourse. Exploratory discourse is not often written down, or if exploration is done at least partially in writing, the writing must be changed substantially before being given to someone to read. More likely, it is

changed so much that it becomes something other than exploratory discourse, but of those pieces that retain the exploratory thought process, probably the recommendation report is the most common form that we use. Recommendation reports can be composed as other aims besides exploration, most commonly scientific discourse or persuasion. But those written as explorations do exist, and let's assume, for the sake of the following discussion, that we have assigned our students to write a recommendation report inventing a replacement for an existing procedure or rule within the college.

Exploration on such matters, as I see it, is composed of three main types of content: raising the question, the search for a new answer, and a test of the new answer. Each of these involves some serious ethical issues.

For raising the question, the most serious ethical problem my students wish they didn't have to face is the need to understand, really understand, the existing paradigm or dogma. It's unfair to those who believe in the paradigm to rush off, half cocked, in search of a new idea when one has only the vaguest understanding of why the existing paradigm was adopted. For example, I frequently get students who want to reform the registration system, so I insist that they go talk to the registrar to see why the present system exists. They come back mighty chastened, and it then becomes my ethical responsibility not to let this taste of reality destroy the exploratory urge. The students now know that our first-come/first-served system has its champions and its justifications, and that all the obvious alternatives have been tried and rejected. This does not mean, however, that the subject should not be explored again, just that the job will be more challenging than originally thought. And the beginning para-

graphs of the resulting paper will be much stronger for the inclusion of an in-depth explanation of the paradigm and its problems.

The main ethical issue of the search stage also involves the kind of research required to understand the paradigm. In their thought processes, students want to cut short the research required to prepare the mind for a good new idea, and when they write the paper they tend to leave out the same kind of material. For example, someone attempting to find that new registration system may fail to restudy such matters as what students want when they register or the limitations and needs of the college bureaucracy. And even if they do think to consider such matters, they may not include them in the report. To me this is unethical. While I am perfectly willing to grant that new ideas spring forth in mysterious ways, to leave out the work that went into the new idea is to exaggerate the mysteriousness and to give the reader the impression that it came from nowhere. New ideas don't come from nowhere, and they are often hard for readers to swallow if it seems that way. It may not be possible, or even necessary, to completely reconstruct the chain of reasoning that the mind must have gone through on its way to the invention, but most of the steps should be there in the writing.

Finally, the test of the new answer has all the ethical problems involved in scientific discourse plus one more that derives from the fact that this particular test is part of an exploration. That is, it is usually not possible to test a new theory as a whole; instead, we test limited hypotheses which, if confirmed, lend weight to the theory. For example, to prove that students would support a proposed new system of registration lends weight to the idea, but it comes far short of a complete proof that the idea is viable. It still may not be practical for the amount of staffing required or some such thing. The writer, who should

understand the limitations of the proof better than anyone, has an ethical obligation to keep the limitations before the readers at all times.

In such ways, then, does writing that deals with ethical issues help writing become more than a skill, more than an art, more than a job. It is an act that involves constant ethical decisions, and we deny our students both the richness and the practical realities of writing as a liberal art if we do not teach them that.